

United Farmers of Alberta [Calgary 1918]

Present Electoral System Condemned

J. D. Hunt, Clerk to Alberta Legislative Council, Denounces System Which Allows Manipulation by Unscrupulous Politicians. Proportional Representation Only Fair Method —Works Well With Occupational Groups. Also Attacks Autocratic Power of Cabinet and Caucus

Unequivocally condemning the present electoral system, "in which the people are not able to exercise any real choice, but are confined to an option between candidates picked out for them by selfish oligarchies, John D. Hunt, Clerk of the Alberta Legislative Council, in a report presented last session, strongly recommends the adoption of Proportional Representation in Alberta elections. "The fundamental objections to the present system from a democratic standpoint," he says, "are first, that the single member constituency restricts the representation of parties to one exclusive party; second, that the non-transferable vote restricts the voter in his choice within the party; third, that election by relative majority very frequently gives minority representation; fourth, that the whole system leaves the door open for manipulation by unscrupulous politicians jockeying for office."

COMBINE ALBERTA CONSTITUENCIES

"The first step to be taken in Alberta," Mr. Hunt contends, "is the combining together of several adjoining single-member constituencies into one large electoral area returning several members. The second step is to bring in the use of the single transferable vote, that is, each elector to have one vote to be transferable under certain contingencies. The third step is to provide for election by a fixed number of votes determined from the total votes polled, and the number of representatives to be elected. The result is representation of all substantial parties in the Assembly in proportion to their strength."

LEADERS ELECTED BY MINORITIES

The anomalies of the present system of election are very clearly illustrated by the writer by the results of the general elections of 1913 and 1917 in this Province. "In 1913 ten members of the Assembly, including both the leader of the Government and the leader of the Opposition were declared representatives of constituencies in which more than half the total votes polled was against them. In the general election of 1917, eleven Soldier Members were returned by Statute without an election, and of the remainder, eleven were declared elected representatives of constituencies in which more than half the total votes polled was against them, so that over one-third of the present Assembly was not elected by a majority even of the voters of their constituencies. How can a people become a governing class under such conditions? Can such an electoral method be deemed a good way to make the people conscious of a direct participation in the governing power? Is such method conducive to attaining national unity through making the whole community realize its partnership in the common interest? Is it any wonder that the people are breaking away from social control and that democracy and representative government as we have them in actual practice are being seriously questioned?

TOO MANY SMALL RIDINGS

"Even under the present system it is common opinion that there are too many small ridings. In 1917 there were, leaving out of consideration the Soldier Members' constituencies, ten ridings polling a total vote of less than 1500 each, while there were eight polling from 3,000 to 4,000 votes each, and five polling from 4,000 to 7,000 each. Why should 188 votes in Clearwater be called a majority and get a

representative, and 2,884 in West Edmonton be deemed a minority and not entitled to a representative? Why should 3,272 votes be called a majority in South Calgary, and 3,544 votes cast for the other two candidates be called a minority and get no representative?

"Why should a series of single-member ridings be cut out from six to eighteen miles wide and from sixty to ninety-six long, giving a representative to nearly every station on the railway line from Edmonton to Macleod? If ridings can be conveniently worked as single-member constituencies when they are from sixty to ninety-six miles long, away from the railway, could the area not be conveniently worked as a multiple-member constituency if it were as wide along the railway?

"The transferable vote saves waste of ballots, and gives electors an active participation in elections. The importance of such saving may be gathered from the following figures compiled from the General Provincial Election returns of 1913 and 1917:

"In 1913 the total ballots cast for all the winning candidates amounted to 53,459, while the total ballots cast for the defeated candidates amounted to 43,526, so that the whole assembly was elected by about ten per cent. more than half the total votes polled and ten per cent. less than half the electors did not get a single representative.

ALBERTA ASSEMBLY "UNREPRESENTATIVE"

"In 1917 the total number of ballots cast for winning candidates was 70,083, and the total number of ballots cast for defeated candidates was 68,130, so that the whole assembly, with the exception of eleven members elected by Statute, were elected by 1953 more than one-half the ballots cast, and 68,130 ballots got no representation; again, of the 70,083 ballots cast for winning candidates, about 18,000 were surplus majorities, and therefore did not actually function in the election, so that practically the whole assembly was elected by the use of 52,000 ballots, while 36,000 ballots were grounded at the polls.

"Much evidence can be produced to show that the multi-member area with the use of a transferable ballot invariably results in cleaner elections, that electoral campaigns under the system gain in dignity, and that corruption is almost entirely eliminated. The reason for this is clear. In the multi-member area one candidate is not pitted against another in such a manner that to win he must necessarily defeat an opponent, for the simple reason that every candidate who has a following in the district sufficient to give him a certain number of votes is sure of election.

"The success of one does not prevent the success of another; neither must party crush party—both will be successful in proportion to their strength, so there will be neither the temptation nor the power to purchase enough to materially effect the election.

"Under the present single-member system a hundred corrupt electors in a closely contested election can decide the representation for that constituency. Under Proportional Representation with its multi-member constituency, the most that one hundred corrupt voters can do, would be to help slightly to aid one member out of many members. Few dishonest candidates would care to spend money with such a slim chance of getting any return for it."

"To those who fear that Proportional Representation would involve the creation in sparsely settled areas of unwieldy constituencies, an illustration from New South Wales may be of interest.

A CONSTITUENCY LARGER THAN BRITISH ISLES

"The electoral district of Strut has an area greater than that of the entire United Kingdom and just equal to that of the New England States. The ballots had to be brought over five hundred miles with inadequate means of transportation, yet in spite of the difficulties which might have seemed in advance to be insurmountable, the Returning Officer for Strut was able to announce the final result for the district in little more than two weeks after polling day.

"The chief electoral officer in his official report, says of the returning officers:

"They had, generally speaking, no previous intimate connection with work of this character, yet were able by their enthusiastic energy and studious instincts to play their part in carrying the first election in this State under Proportional Representation to such a satisfactory issue that no note of adverse criticism was sounded by candidates or voting public."

WEAKNESS OF LOCALITY REPRESENTATION

Mr. Hunt points out the weakness of the "locality theory" of representation as it is today. It requires modification, he says. "Under this system the candidate who received more votes in the election than any other candidate is declared the representative of the locality unit. If there should happen to be five candidates of about

equal political strength, the winner might have only 22 per cent. of the total vote. Can he be justly called the representative of a constituency in which 78 per cent. of the people have voted against him? Even with only one opponent in the field, one more than fifty per cent. of the electors gives him the seat with one less than fifty per cent. of the electors against him. Is he then, the representative of all the people? Can such a system be called democratic? Can it be called representative in the true sense? Is it any wonder that large bodies of the electors lose respect for government and gradually show less and less regard for the laws passed by so-called representatives elected in such a manner? Is the system one adapted to make the people believe that all are on an equality? That one man's vote is equal to any other man's vote? Is such a system an incentive to the development of social unity, or does it tend to create indifference and even social anarchy? Does such a system fulfil the requirements of a good assembly as laid down by John Stuart Mill:

"A majority of the electors should always have a majority of the representatives; but a minority of the electors should always have a minority of the representatives. Man for man they should be fully represented as the majority, and unless they are there is no equal government of inequality, and unless they are there is no equal government of inequality and privilege—contrary to all just government, but above all contrary to the principle of democracy which professes equality as its very root and foundation.

This awkward and destructive territorial method is a heritage from the past when society was largely rural and location meant the same as opinion, purpose and occupation. In former days too, the wide difference between rural and town franchise secured that variety in representation which the different interests of the country demanded. What worked well when we had a variety of franchise does not do the same when we have uniformity of franchise.

UTILIZE GROUP COHESION

Mr. Hunt suggests that the advantages of group social cohesion might be utilized by the State, "while there is at least a rudimentary profession of morality among lawyers, physicians, soldiers, professors and teachers, there is practically no semblance of fixed customs or moral code to guide the vast mass of industrial activities and relations of the present time. The rights and relations of employer and employee, and of both with the public, when not regulated in an arbitrary manner by the State are settled without any attempt at uniformity of procedure, or any regard for equality of principle, according to the relative strength in each instance of the parties involved." The remedy, the writer believes, lies in constituting a regulating body separate from the State, subject to the State's general supervision. He makes no direct references to group organization among the farmers of Alberta or the policy of the U.F.A., but confines himself rather to discussing the possibilities of such groups in city industry. "These groups," he says, "would have the tendency to produce highly essential moral and social environment, fraternal activities, mutual aid and co-operation." He believes these groups should be nationwide and that there should be groups of both employers and employees in each industry.

Mr. Hunt points out that Proportional Representation does not interfere with the organization of occupational groups. He points out that under the present system many citizens who have the vote are never able to give effectual expression to their opinions. "The great want at present is not so much the enfranchisement of the unfranchised as the representation of the unrepresented."

WILL REDUCE ELECTION COSTS

"Opponents of the personal constituency assert, that large areas will favor the money power. Those who say this forget that under such system what is wanted for election is not a majority of the whole area, but only a fixed number of votes. A co-herent body of poor voters, numbering one more than one-sixth of a five-member constituency, must secure a representative. Thus Labor will have representation without the necessity for any expenditure comparable to the expenses necessary at present. Further, in many ways a party will economise. Several candidates will share the whole expense. The large area will take the place of five or more smaller locality constituencies, in each of which a fruitless contest might have had to be fought. Further, the objection has no support from experience. The experience of the countries that have adopted a Proportional system points directly to the other way.

GENERAL EFFECTS OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

"Another objection is that the member will lose personal touch with his constituency and the power of the caucus be increased. This objection results from a superficial study of the system. Under the new system, each member will be returned by a body of constituents who are in political agreement and sympathy with him. A member may be trusted to know where his strength lies in the constituency. The

personal touch will be constant and real. A member will not have to be courting the odd man. He will have more political meetings and fewer flower shows. He will not have to exploit sub-conscious irrationality with a brass band. If the system will increase the power of the caucus, it is strange that in all places and at all times, in Belgium, as in England, the general tendency of the party managers has been to condemn it, and the general tendency of the independent politician has been in its favor.

"Proportional Representation promises the great virtue that while the majority of the electors are able to elect a majority of representatives, the minority also obtains representation in proportion to its strength."

A COURAGEOUS REPORT

Mr. Hunt's report is an ably written and useful addition to the literature of Proportional Representation. He shows great courage in attacking the evils which have arisen under the party system, and expresses the opinion that many of these evils would be eliminated by the adoption of this proportional method of electing representatives. There is no case for the elective democratic government of modern states as generally carried on that cannot be knocked to pieces in five minutes," he declares. "It is manifest that upon countless important public issues there is no collective will, and nothing in the mind of the average man except blank indifference; that our present electoral system simply places power in the hands of the most skilful electioneers. Our present methods of election do not give us representative government at all, at least not government representative of the people"

In his discussion of present conditions, Mr. Hunt is emphatic. "What can we do about present bad governments?" he asks. "It would not be fair to hang or imprison any of the members since the citizens are as culpable as they, but it might be advisable to remove all of them as they come up next time for re-election." His contention, however, is that "what we need is not to destroy parties, but to bring them under proper control."

He declares that new members of our governments and parliaments "cannot be worse than the old," and "until they've learned all the little tricks of the trade, are likely to be better. Certainly some of the old-timers among them have been there too long for the country's good. Perhaps it is not wholly fair to punish them in any way, but it looks from the point of view of the people, like a plain matter of self-preservation. Also it will demonstrate to them that while the people will stand a good deal, there are limits and that they've crossed those limits. The new ones, as well, will profit by the lesson."

Mr. Hunt declares that at the present time "little legislation originates with the members themselves. It is generally concocted by the cabinet ministers, and passed under orders. Independence in a private member is deemed insanity. Power comes only through subserviency to those who can bestow it. The Cabinet controls the Speaker, the House Committees and the patronage, and the local member who is not a ouiija board, is soon either taken into the government, or placed in cold storage. Few of the members are really chosen and elected by the people. They are suggested and returned by the machine which exacts a full return for services rendered. It does not matter how many people cast votes at elections, or how often the government changes, if in the end the representatives are not capable of exercising, or do not exercise due control over the ministers and the machinery of government."

PEOPLE THEMSELVES TO BLAME

While unsparing in his criticism of present day legislatures, Mr. Hunt fixes the ultimate responsibility among the people themselves.

QUESTIONS WHICH* ALBERTA FARMERS ARE ANSWERING

Mr. Hunt raises a number of questions to which the United Farmers of Alberta believe they are beginning to supply the answer. "Back of all reform," he declares, "lies the method of getting it. Back of the question of what we want lies the question—the fundamental question of all government—How are we going to get it? How are we going to get public servants who will get it for us? How are we going to get genuine representatives who will serve our interests, and not their own, or the interests of some special group or body of our fellow citizens whose power is of the few and not of the many?" The U.F.A. believe that the efficient mobilization of opinion from the local group upwards is providing the answers to Mr. Hunt's questions. And they believe that efficient organization can only be built up on the basis of their occupational group.

Although Mr. Hunt was officially appointed by the Alberta Government to prepare this report for the legislature, the report has not yet been printed. It is apparently unpalatable to some members of the Cabinet and at least one minister has described it as "dangerous propaganda."

(Issued by The United Farmers of Alberta)